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Senior English students, in spite of themselves, respond to Dickens both critically and emotionally. Impressed by Dickens' "artistry of style," they nonetheless disagree with each other over whether his characters are believable and whether the exaggeration of character traits is an effective device. The deepest level of understanding occurs after the students have finished the novel and can see the relationships among the characters and their correlation with the structure of the novel. Students respond emotionally to Dickens on a subconscious level because he reflects their deepest needs and attitudes. They support Dickens' attacks on institutions and his ridicule, through repulsive physical descriptions, of socially important individuals. The students also identify with Dickens through his attitude toward life, which is dominated by a vast sympathy toward mankind, almost religious in its expression but lacking in specifically religious ideas; and through his tendency to criticize society rather than support specific causes designed to improve it. (LH)

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Spokesman for the new generation?

Dickens and the Teen-age Subconscious

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A PRIZE ARTICLE

By JAN WIDGERY

WHEN a friend discovered recently that I was teaching Dickens to my Senior Honors English students, she shook her head. "I suppose they all hate him!" She was wrong. Only a few "hate him." What surprises me is that so many passionately like him. Why? What can he possibly have to say to the sophisticated young intellectual whose taste buds have been titillated by e. e. cummings or J. D. Salinger, who has swallowed—perhaps not whole but with very little thoughtful chewing—Samuel Beckett or Edward Albee, and who has finally settled on the heady nourishment of Faulkner or Kafka or Joyce as his *pièce de résistance?*

Ask first what these students are like. I teach the advanced seniors in a college preparatory girls' school. They come from fairly prosperous homes, are conventionally well-behaved, sheltered girls. But their minds range far and wide. They are poised on the brink of flight and revolt. At seventeen and eighteen, they sip the same cynical wine as the college students who are their friends. But they are too young to be consistent. Happily, they are not consistent. One moment they distrust what they believe to be contrived emotionalism in Emily Dickinson, and the next they confess a lingering nostalgia for Field's "Little Boy Blue." They abhor clichés, yet talk among themselves in a handful of patterned phrases which depend on context and tone of voice for their meaning. They distrust piety and hypocrisy, yet, like most of society's captives, to a certain extent must practice both in order to progress in school, "get into college," and come to terms with the practical goals of career and marriage. They scorn institutions and authority, yet are unexpectedly vulnerable to their fathers' enthusiasm for Dickens.

So these are the young people whom I must lead into *Bleak House.* They remember enjoying *Great Expectations* and *Tale of Two Cities* in eighth or ninth grade, but are apprehensive about any established "good writer." Dickens is old-fashioned. They suspect, though they are not entirely sure, what their current literary gods might think about Dickens. When I tell them he influenced Shaw and Dostoyevsky and Kafka—all of whom they admire—they are still not reassured. The fact that last year's graduates voted enthusiastically that *Bleak House* should be kept in the curriculum is not enough. Yet this is a large dose that must be swallowed. They tackle it bravely.

At first, they are impressed in spite of themselves by Dickens' artistry of style in his first chapters, describing the creeping fog in London. His satire and his objectivity disarm them. But when they meet Esther, they howl derisively, "She makes Orphan Annie look like a delinquent!" They are annoyed by her stupidity in not seeing through Richard Carstone's faults or Skimpole's treachery. They even challenge Dickens' understanding of a woman's viewpoint. "Does he know enough about a good, real woman?"

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Rapidly, they become too emotionally involved to exercise objective criticism. They are caught up in the dizzying convolutions of plot, the swarm of characters, the suspense itself. They speculate excitedly about the murderer. They protest Esther's planning to marry elderly Mr. Jarndyce. They mourn over "Poor Charley, with her big apron, acting like a mother. It makes you feel terrible!" They are only momentarily daunted by the fruitlessness of applying psychological analysis to Dickens: Is Esther's and Ada's relationship a healthy one? they ask. What are the effects of Esther's love-deprived childhood? What is the symbolism in the buried doll?

THEY begin to respond to and understand the subtler levels of morality which Humphrey House[1] has pointed out in Dickens: (1) the mere breaking of laws; (2) the absence or failure of love; (3) the emotional greed and exploitation of one person by another, which so often leads to cruelty and violence. For instance, they laugh at Mrs. Jellyby's failure of love when she ignores her little boy's falling down the flight of stairs, or feels she is too busy with her foreign missions to attend her own daughter's wedding. But they hate Mr. Turveydrop, when he gives his son the privilege of supporting him, and Mr. Skimpole, who exploits Mr. Jarndyce's generosity and for a commission betrays Richard into the hands of a legal vulture.

In their reaction to Dickens' characterizations, the students are perhaps most widely in disagreement. This comes partly from their approaching him with varied standards. They have to move from the subjective to the objective viewpoint, from the believability criterion to the way in which the characters express the total concept. "I can see them, but I don't believe in them," one student objected. "They are exaggerated, but I believe them," said another. Still others insisted, "I can find people right here in school who are just like some of the characters in *Bleak House*." Or "Mrs. Jellyby is like my mother when she's getting ready for the bazaar!" Becoming more analytical, they said thoughtfully that the traits were realistic; sometimes the combinations weren't. "The minor characters seem more real than the major." One girl commented that the characters "are almost personified traits."

Their reaction brings to mind Santayana's benevolent laughter at the polite world, which pretends to laugh when Dickens' comedy slaps it in the face, saying, "There, take that! That's what you really are!" As Santayana points out, this polite world "does not like to see itself by chance in the glass without having had time to compose its features for demure self-contemplation. 'What a bad mirror,' it exclaims; 'it must be concave or convex; for surely I never looked like that. Mere caricature, farce, and horseplay. Dickens exaggerates; *I* never was so sentimental as that; *I* never saw anything so dreadful; *I* don't believe there were ever any people like Quilp, or Squeers, or Serjeant Buzfuz.' But the polite world is lying; there *are* such people; we are such people ourselves in our true moments, in our veritable impulses; but we are careful to stifle and to hide those moments from ourselves and from the world; to purse and pucker ourselves into the mask of our conventional personality; and so simpering, we profess that it is very coarse and inartistic of Dickens to undo our life's work for us in an instant, and remind us of what we are."[2]

EVEN when the students apply objective critical tools to the character study, they seem unable to agree. For instance, we discussed E. M. Forster's famous "flat" versus "round" definition. With a grand gesture, Forster lumps nearly all Dickens' characters into the flat category, "constructed round a single idea or quality . . . expressed in one sentence such as 'I never will desert Mr. Micawber.'" But even he is uneasily aware that this is too pat, that these people in Dickens' novels are something more than "little luminous disks of a pre-arranged size, pushed hither and thither like counters across the void," that flatness does not account for the "wonderful feeling of human depth." He extricates himself from his dilemma by concluding that "the immense vitality of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own. It is a conjuring trick; at any moment we may look at Mr. Pickwick edgeways and find him no thicker than a gramaphone record. But we never get the sideway view. Mr. Pickwick is far too adroit and well-trained."[3]

The students ultimately distrust Forster's oversimplification. Even the least sympathetic of them resist his classifications, as they might resent their own friends' being categorized. Perhaps this is part of their passionate resistance to all preformulated definitions and assumptions. The best aspects of existentialism may filter down into the attitudes of young people who are hardly aware of it as a system of thought!

[1] Humphrey House, "The Macabre Dickens" from *All in Due Time* (London, 1955); first presented as a broadcast on the B.B.C. Third Programme in 1947. My source was its inclusion in a collection of essays called *The Dickens Critics*, edited by George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr., Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1961, p. 190. (Copyright © 1961 by Cornell University. Used by permission of Cornell University Press.)

[2] George Santayana, "Dickens," from *The Dial* LXXI (1921), 537–549; also *Soliloquies in England* (London, 1922), p. 135. My source: *The Dickens Critics*, p. 135 (see footnote 1).

[3] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1954, pp. 104–109. (Copyright 1927 by Harcourt, Brace and World, by E. M. Forster in 1954.)

The deepest level of understanding reached by the students came only when they had finished *Bleak House*. They could see it whole. They could, with Jack Lindsay, understand that Dickens' people "are lyrical images which gain profundity and symbolical significance through their relation to a total concept, a total movement, born out of a personal tension. . . . Dickens from this angle shows up as a creator of the highest order; and to call his people flatly two-dimensional is to miss the terrific inwardness of the whole concept which reacts on each single figure, giving it a depth of emotional awareness."[4] Demonstrating how clearly some of the students came to understand Dickens' structural unity is this passage from one of their final exam papers: "Mrs. Jellyby is an excellent foil for Esther, for every good quality which Esther possesses is perverted in Mrs. Jellyby. Therefore our recognition of her evil predicates a corresponding recognition of Esther's goodness." They had finally achieved objective analysis.

THE important question is still unanswered. Why do the students respond to an "old-hat" author like Dickens? On the preparatory school level, there has to be an appeal beyond the intellectual. These students are still too young for critical analysis to be their be-all and end-all. On the other hand, they are already too mature to be satisfied by plot or story-line alone. Certainly, they can satisfy their story-hunger more effortlessly elsewhere, without thrusting through a thicket of wordy description and bewildering, often irrelevant detail.

Keenly perceptive about the world and other people, seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds seem to suffer from a peculiar reluctance to explore their own emotions. They are the last people who can tell you why they react as they do. The ones who dislike Dickens—and of course some do—are quite vocal. Along with the ones who like him, they have a number of ready answers. But if one analyzes these answers, they dwindle like sand in a sieve. Their force disintegrates. They finally are not the real answers. The basic reasons for response to Dickens seem to lie deeper, in the unconscious, perhaps; certainly rising from the students' deepest needs and attitudes and reflecting their sources of internal conflicts.

Some psychologists tend to discount conflict in young women today. Mervin Freedman,[5] in discussing a recent study of Vassar students, concludes that the majority of adolescent girls do not display a "crisis of identity." Their social scene, he says "seems to be characterized more by order and stability than by upheaval and dislocation." Perhaps in the sexual-social-familial relationships this is true. One cannot help challenging its validity on the intellectual level. Certainly, many of the students whose minds and attitudes are revealed in our literature discussions seem disturbed by spiritual and ideological conflict. They face with fresh, point-blank honesty everything their elders take for granted. They see in all its stale stage-lighting the discrepancy in our thinking, the hypocrisy in our ideals. What happens, unfortunately, is that these flawed aspects of the world of ideas force them to reject the whole, whose beauty they intuitively recognize. This is what creates the conflict. They are too young to accept compromise. We cheer them for resisting compromise—that most insidious form of disillusion—while we shudder piously at the battering we know they will get from "the practical world." They come from "nice" upper-middle-class homes, where life, as Trilling says, goes pleasantly on. There are few socially-acceptable ways of giving a fair hearing to both sides of their conflicting viewpoints, few outlets for the rebel halves of them.

THIS is where Dickens helps them. Not many of us would go as far as Shaw did in calling Dickens a revolutionist, or say that *Little Dorrit* "is a more seditious book than *Das Kapital*." Some of us would find more acceptable Jack Lindsay's feeling that Dickens was ahead of his time in writing of the alienation of man from man, of man from himself. All of us would agree that he attacks institutions—the very accepted authorities or symbols of authority which young people themselves always want to challenge. Chancery and the law profession are obvious targets in *Bleak House*, along with the pomp of high society, the money-lenders, and so on. But some of Dickens' destructive attack is more disguised. This would increase its power, if Simon O. Lesser in his *Fiction and the Unconscious*,[6] is right in claiming that the primary appeal of fiction is to the unconscious. He believes that the ego relaxes its vigil only if its attention is diverted or the deviation from acceptable attitudes is disguised. Although Dickens usually swings a rather heavy broadsword, he is also adept with the stiletto. He openly criticizes (or has Esther criticize) Mrs. Jellyby as the apotheosis of the misguided do-gooder. He more subtly expresses our resentment toward her by describing her as physically unattractive, hair uncombed, dress not meeting in back, "the open space . . . railed across with a lattice-work of staylace." Similarly, Dickens gives us Mr. Chadband, the

[4] Jack Lindsay, "Final Judgment," *Charles Dickens* (Philosophical Library, New York, 1950). My source: *The Dickens Critics*, p. 239. (See footnote 1.)

[5] Mervin B. Freedman, "Some Theoretical and Practical Implications of a Longitudinal Study of College Women," *Psychiatry*, Vol. 26, p. 184.

[6] Simon O. Lesser, *Fiction and the Unconscious* (Beacon Hill Press, 1957).

preacher carefully identified with no denomination but nevertheless associated in our minds with the worst pomposity of self-righteous professional divines. He criticizes Mr. Chadband explicitly for failing to understand the needs of little Jo, the street urchin; for preaching at him rather than talking to him. Implicitly and more savagely, Mr. Chadband is destroyed by Dickens' physical description of him: "A large yellow man, with a fat smile, and a general appearance of having a good deal of train oil in his system. . . . He moves softly and cumbrously, not unlike a bear who has been taught to walk upright. He is very much embarrassed about the arms, as if they were inconvenient to him and he wanted to grovel; is very much in a perspiration about the head; and never speaks without first putting up his great hand as if delivering a token to his hearers that he is going to edify them."

Through devastating ridicule, through viciously repulsive physical descriptions, Dickens constantly undermines the individuals whom society is supposed to support. Even his attack on the law courts in *Bleak House* has a double-edged force. The individual representatives are his targets as much as the institution. He either kills them off by particularly brutal or irrational means—as with Krook and Tulkinghorn—or he destroys them where they stand, still alive. Mr. Vholes is such a one. The lawyer who exploited Richard Carstone's dream of wealth and sucked him dry of all his and Ada's inheritance, is described as standing "immovable, except that he secretly picked at one of the red pimples on his yellow face with his black glove." What more satisfying revenge could repressed antagonism find?

Even more than they enjoy Dickens as a spokesman for their imprisoned rebelliousness, the students, I think, have a real affinity for his attitude toward life. He is in some way close to them. Santayana, in his beautiful and understanding essay on Dickens, describes him in terms which seem almost to characterize some of the young people. "Dickens was . . . a waif himself, and utterly disinherited. For example, the terrible heritage of contentious religions which fills the world seems not to exist for him. In this matter he was like a sensitive child, with a most religious disposition, but no religious ideas. Perhaps, properly speaking, he had no *ideas* on any subject; what he had was a vast sympathetic participation in the daily life of mankind; and what he saw of ancient institutions made him hate them, as needless sources of oppression, misery, selfishness, and rancour. His one political passion was philanthropy, genuine but felt only on its negative, reforming side; of positive Utopias, or enthusiasms, we hear nothing."[7]

Many of our young people, too, are waifs, it seems to some of us who teach them: not economically or socially, perhaps; but certainly intellectual waifs, or spiritual waifs. They too have "a most religious disposition," but whatever their church upbringing, very few religious ideas which they can trust or which satisfy them. They too have a vast sympathy toward mankind and its misery. They too (like all of us) can more easily criticize than find just the right cause to support with all the passionate fervor banked up in them.

And so Dickens, for those young students who have made the effort to study him, has perhaps joined the ranks of spokesmen-in-the-wings for their generation. He has also offered illumination to some of us who try to guide their thinking and understand their needs.

[7] See footnote 2.

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